

April 19, 2020
First Sunday after Easter

Sixth Sunday of Remote Worship due to Coronavirus

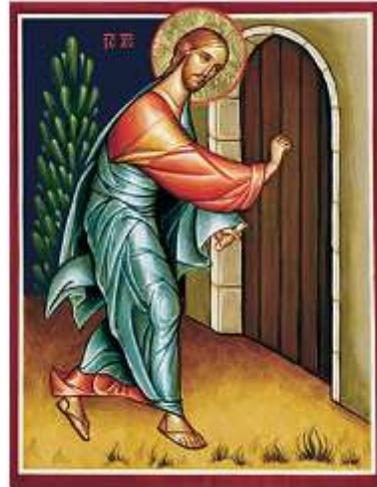
Rev. Jacob Snowden

1 Peter 1: 3-9

Joy and Laughter Sunday—“Seriously Funny”

Today’s reading is from 1 Peter 1:3-9:

³ *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,*
⁴ *and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you,*
⁵ *who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.* ⁶ *In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials,* ⁷ *so that the genuineness of your faith--being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire--may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.* ⁸ *Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy,* ⁹ *for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*



Let us pray:

God of joy and health and mirth, help us have fun and see laughter’s worth. Amen.

Some people are under the impression that certain times and topics are never funny. You should never, COULD never, make a joke during church or about...the Coronavirus. I am not one of those people. These are times that call for a little Holy Humor. However, I recognize that COVID is a touchy subject, or more appropriately a no-touchy subject. What kinds of jokes can we make about the Coronavirus? Well, inside jokes of course!

As we have already said, Joy and Laughter Sunday did not originate with me or with Woods Church. Like many of the jokes written for this morning, it is--like me--stolen (LOL). The day after Easter, Eastern Orthodox priests are rumored to have met on the steps of their sanctuaries and there they would tell jokes as the start of “Bright Week.”

(Hey, why are there so many pastels during Easter?
because even colors can take themselves a little lighter.)

Why all of that fun and frivolity? Because the joke, they said, was on Satan. The darkness that was the tomb was really the darkness of a womb that gave birth to a living hope that all creation was being reconciled to God. Death’s victory and sting were crossed out after Calvary (and that very bad pun was intended. Keep a tally. We’ll make it a game!)

I recognize that you might be among those who don't find a sermon to be the appropriate time for jokes and games, maybe ESPECIALLY my version of jokes and games, which is why I have entitled my sermon "Seriously funny." As we have already sung, there is a time for every purpose under heaven, and I find church to be a wonderful place to be seriously funny. God, I am convinced, is seriously funny. Because the gifts of joy and laughter are...make no mistake...gifts of God.

That is why laughter is the best medicine.(Unless you have an overactive bladder, because then laughter is a terribly messy medicine. The best medicines for OAB, that is overactive bladder, are:

OXY-BUTYNIN
TOLL-TERO-DINE
TRO-SPIUM
DARE-A-FEN-A-SIN
SOLA-FEN-A-SIN
or FEEZO-TERO-DINE

This joke was brought to you by WebMD. (Not a Doctor)

Truly, proverbially, laughter is good medicine. Proverbs 17:22 says, *A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones.* So we have Joy and Laughter Sunday, where we remember that no matter our circumstances, we *can rejoice even if now for a little while we have had to suffer various trials*, [because] *we are receiving the outcome of our faith.*

Do you feel the tension of that verse? How in the world are we supposed to rejoice or laugh in the midst of our suffering and solitude? Can't you imagine a better time for Holy Humor? I felt that tension this week writing about laughter as medicine in the middle of a pandemic. But Grady Nutt, a preacher and comedian before my time, called laughter "the hand of God on the shoulder of a troubled world."

When I think about the moments I've laughed hardest, they've been in serious circumstances. "Nothing is so sacred, so taboo, or so disgusting that it cannot be the subject of humor. Quite the contrary—it is precisely those topics culturally defined as sacred, taboo, or disgusting which more often than not provide the principal grist for humor mills."¹

One of the people in my life who had the funniest stories was a neighbor of mine, a church member, who also owned a small-town funeral home. I was having lunch with him after services one day.

"We had a beautiful service for this one fellow," Mr. Weathersby said. "It was a big event with tons of people. He was a war hero, a double amputee, who had come back from battle and done great things for this community. My fellows put his body in the hearse and there was a miles-long procession to the graveside, but when we went to open the casket there was no body! My fellows called me, and they were terrified! 'Mr. Weathersby, we don't know what in the world happened. We loaded the body, were rushing to the graveside with no problems. We got caught by a train a little by surprise, but we don't know what happened!'"

Mr. Weathersby was smiling, remembering, and he had the whole lunch table in suspense, just waiting for us to ask him what happened.

¹ Alan Dundes, and Thomas Hauschild. "Auschwitz Jokes" in *Western Folklore* 42, No. 4 (Oct. 1983), 249.

“I found them at the hearse, graveside. They were in a tizzy. So I asked them, ‘Boys, when you came up on that train, how fast did you stop?’

“What happened, you see, was they had slammed on the breaks, so this double amputee had slid down to one end of the casket.” Giggling to himself, remembering, “I opened up both lids to the casket, and we found him, made sure no one was watching, shimmied the body where it needed to be and called the pallbearers over. No one was the wiser.”

Who better to laugh in the face of death than a funeral director? And if, as Easter people, we can laugh in the face of death, surely we can laugh at our lives in this strange social distance situation.

Last week was the second time I was able to worship via Livestream at home. It was nice. I had a cinnamon roll and coffee during the service. I was dressed comfortably. I put a few chairs between the couch and the TV to feel like I wasn’t on the front pew; it was fantastic.

What about work? I’ve been in so many stinkin’ zoom meetings. It’s not TV, it’s HBO. Nope, not HBO either, this is Session Meeting, and staff reports are due. I made popcorn for nothing!

There is plenty that is not funny about our current situation. Spending so much time away from friends and colleagues has shown our true colors.

I think that might have said “true hair colors.”

But in whatever our circumstances, we by faith are always Easter people. This is what the passage for today is trying to communicate to us. 1 Peter was written to exiles in diaspora, spread across all of Asia Minor. They were strangers in strange lands, and the advice they received was to rejoice even amid suffering because...

v. 3 God had mercifully given new life and *living hope through the resurrection*.

v. 4 God had given *an imperishable, undefiled, unfading inheritance in heaven*.

v. 5 People were being *protected by the power of God*.

So even though the recipients of 1 Peter were hard pressed, they needed to find ways to rejoice. Finding joy and laughter was a way God kept a hand on the shoulders of a weary people in a weary world. Finding time to laugh is not to close our eyes to the sufferings of our present moment, but to open our eyes to the hope and joy we have in Christ. I think that is what’s at stake in the story of Thomas. We need not think of Thomas as a doubter. I think Thomas wanted to see what the other apostles had seen—hope in a risen savior. Can it be that laughter, like a little mud and spittle to the face, is what opens our eyes to see the joy of Christ at work even now in our strange circumstance?

Near the end of his life, Jesus gathered his disciples and said to them, *You will weep and mourn, you will have pain, but your pain will be turned to joy. No one will take your joy from you...In the world you will have persecution.* And then, he said, in the King James Version, *But be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world.* (John 16: 20, 33)

I like the words of Jim Harnish, a Methodist-- I like quoting Methodists because it's a chance for the "frozen chosen" to be "strangely warmed."

"The resonant laughter echoing from heaven is not cheap, shallow, watery frivolity; it is rich, deep, vivid joy. It is gladness that comes from the same place as suffering; joy that comes from the same place as tears. It is the joy of men and women who face the suffering, injustice and pain of the world in all its fury, but have taken hold of something stronger, deeper and more powerful. They have grasped the assurance of the ultimate triumph of the goodness of God. They are of good cheer because they know that the power of God in Jesus Christ has overcome the world."²

That's how I think we should imagine what is seriously funny. God can make 'dem bones, 'dem bones, 'dem dry bones—walk around. In the valley of the shadow of death, God is with us.

I love the insight of the novelist Peter DeVries, who wrote wonderfully comic and engaging books: "Do not assume," he once said, "that because I write in comic ways, I am being trivial, and I will not assume, that because you write in serious ways, you are being profound!"

When we are most pressed, when we are most stressed, somber rigidity is not always the order of the day. Couldn't you use a little laughter?

Levity, Brevity, Wisdom, and Wit make for a gospel that's hard to forget! Is that not how we can feel the hand of God on the shoulder of a troubled world?

"The hand of God on the shoulder of a troubled world"

We need to be seriously funny. We need to laugh. And for today, let your laughter be your way of rejoicing. Give it as an offering to God. (checks and texts are also acceptable.) Hear this command from First Peter again with just the smallest twist:

Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and [joke] with an indescribable and glorious[laugh].

It is acceptable to laugh, to smile, to have fun as people of God. We take the faith seriously, but we don't have to take ourselves so seriously. Chesterton was right.

"Angels can fly...because they take themselves so lightly."

Let us pray:

Holy God of holy humor, on the cross you transformed suffering into salvation. By the tomb you transformed lament into laughter, you have taken our funeral fashions and clothed us with joy instead (and by "joy" a certain few of us mean pajamas). As often as we remember to wash our hands, may you wash us in joy this Eastertide. Let us not be silent! O Lord, our God, we give you thanks forever! Amen.

² James Harnish, *Men at Mid-Life: Steering Through The Detours*, p. 76.